

Relearning Professionalism: From High School Teacher to University Professor

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Abstract

In this narrative response to stories from the field, the author chronicles her transition from high school teacher to university professor. The transition was marked by a dissonance about what it means to be a professional in each setting. The author shares several lessons learned about the autonomy in higher education, which was at first daunting, and later a relief in her new environment.

*“She held court under the Palm of Deborah, and the Israelites came to her to have their disputes decided”
(Judges 4:5, New International Version)*

In the past three years, I have often thought of the prophet Deborah whose story is told in the book of Judges. She served the people of Israel first as prophet and judge. Later, she led Barak into battle (and earned the honor of victory) against Sisera and the Canaanites. Her character resonates with me because she was a strong woman who worked among men, she was a leader in her community, and she followed God’s urging from her home into unknown battles. What lessons did she learn? What personal growth did she experience as she moved from prophet to battle commander? My own career transition from K-12 teaching to higher education (HE) was more difficult than I expected. But unlike Deborah, I could read about others’ experiences. One afternoon, as I was scanning my usual blogs, I ran across a particularly poignant (though somewhat crass) post title: Can teaching be a real profession, if you can’t take a bathroom break when nature calls? John Merrow (2015), who was reiterating a similar sentiment from a friend of his, had verbalized what I had been wrestling with—is teaching a vocation or profession? At the time, I was about two months into my first year of HE, and I was ruminating on Deborah and struggling to reconcile conflicting ideas: (a) I had always considered myself to be in a profession, but (b) I did not feel professional

any longer. Had this been anyone but me, I would have encouraged the moment of disequilibrium and opportunity for personal growth; instead, I was frustrated by the impasse.

Professional K-12 Education

My closest colleagues in graduate school were (as I call them) school counselors, but they preferred the term professional school counselor. This is because the American School Counseling Association espouses a comprehensive model of school counseling in which counselors do more than respond to emergencies; they provide preventative and responsive services, they partner with teachers, and they meet professional competencies. The new title and the new model helped to professionalize school counseling. A simple Google search reveals an analogous quandary in teaching: is teaching a vocation or a profession? This matters because research shows that education as a profession is positively correlated to teacher self-efficacy and job satisfaction (Pearson & Moomaw, 2005). Anecdotally, teachers often express frustration at comments about getting summers off, having settled on teaching (those who can’t, teach), or being a part of a failing system. Similarly, many teachers have stories about parents who act as experts simply because they went to school. For instance, I once had a student’s mom ask that I smile less because it confused her 16 year-old. And, it is not just these comments that make teachers feel unprofessional. Currently, in fact, many scholars are documenting the erosion of teacher autonomy in the classroom due to increased bureaucratic management and standardization of practices (Anderson & Cohen, 2015; Evetts, 2011). Thus, between a somewhat unspoken agreement that teaching is not quite a profession and a decrease in teacher autonomy, it makes sense that professional educators, from counselors to teachers, must campaign to be regarded as professionals.

Despite this, I always regarded myself as a professional when I taught high school. I took my job seriously and

met all the stipulations of my contract, I did not shy away from unhappy or overly-involved parents, and I was a leader in my building and a department chair. In some sense, I was Deborah, still under the sacred tree, unaware of the battles ahead. It was not until I made the transition to HE that I questioned if I had been in a profession at all and now, three years into my HE career, I can say for certain that K-12 education is only a profession in some ways, and I was only partly a professional. The lessons on how to enter the profession of higher education have been arduous and time-consuming.

The Work Week

The first lesson: in HE, without a contract outlining what time I ought to be at work, I was at first unable to organize my time effectively. I wondered, should I arrive just before my first class? Or maybe I come early and work on “becoming an active, contributing member of the local academic community,” which is “an essential part” of my academic work (VanZanten, 2011, p. 164). Most mornings this was a moot point because I could not wake up at 5:30 a.m. any more—which I did daily for 13 years. Conversely, some days I could not sleep past 5 a.m. or so. What did this mean? Was I alternatively working off a high school teacher’s perpetual sleep debt and still feeling a high school teacher’s guilt? My teaching contract told me when to arrive and when I should leave, and beginning HE, I struggled to even guess how many hours a week I should work. To investigate, I kept track of my hours for 20 or so weeks. This exercise was not fruitful in determining when I should be at work, because as it turned out, HE is not really about hours worked but how much energy to invest. VanZanten (2011) talks about this struggle for new HE faculty. She comments that the flexibility in hours can cause too many working hours, or can translate to new faculty spending too much time preparing to teach, such that she reminds her readers they have a right to a work/life balance (p. 16). Over time, I have learned to aim for this balance and I have learned to worry less about the nitty-gritty of timing my work.

The Honest Truth

The second lesson is a bit more uncomfortable for me to confess. Teaching high school, I prided myself on effectively providing honest feedback. I have had teary conversations with moms worried about their daughters’ choices of friends, with guardians concerned

about their child’s analytical skills, and with students about their failed prom proposals. Yet, all that practice did not translate into effective constructive feedback in HE. During my first semester, I had a student, whom I will call William. He was perpetually just a few minutes late (to class, on assignments, and etc.). He was a junior education major and faculty in the department were watching and evaluating students to make sure they had the right skills and dispositions to be effective teachers. Obviously, someone who consistently wanders in to class just after it begins does not yet have the disposition of a teacher. William needed one of those tough love conversations that I thought I was so good at. However, I found that I first tried to ignore the behavior, making a note on my syllabus: next time define tardy. When I finally mentioned William’s behavior in a faculty meeting, my more experienced colleagues were shocked that I had not spoken to him the first day he showed up late. Did I plan to reduce his grade? Did I not understand that I had a professional obligation to direct his growth? After that, I did talk to William, but it was so buffered by positive language it was almost Orwellian doublespeak. His habits persisted.

Nearly three semesters later, I was assigned to be William’s student teaching field supervisor and evaluator. I dreaded it. Was he always going to be three minutes short of on-time—either literally or figuratively? And, true to form, William did not successfully complete student teaching. He did not prepare his lesson plans, he could not learn students’ names, and he was rarely prepared to start class on time. I failed him professionally. I wondered if Deborah’s battlefield experiences made her realize previous misjudgments; maybe this is what the author of Hebrews meant when he wrote about Deborah’s “weakness turn[ing] to strength” (Hebrews 11:34).

William’s case forced me to consider carefully how I give feedback to my students. Now, I no longer couch negative feedback in positive comments; sometimes tough love is more of the tough than of the love. Now, I talk to students the first time I notice an area that needs attention, and I let it be ugly, if it is. Lately, I have begun with, “We need to have a difficult conversation.” This phrase is borrowed from Mary Scholl, a faculty member at Marlboro College and I appreciate it because there is absolute clarity about what kind of feedback a student is getting and it forces me to say directly what I mean.

My Pirate Hat

There is a third lesson that I am just now beginning to appreciate, and that is the lesson of professional calling, or as I think of it: wearing my pirate hat. This lesson is in contrast to one I learned in K-12 education after one difficult spring and fall in which a beloved administrator was suddenly removed from his job. As the remaining administration team tried to re-animate the faculty members and to start a new school year, they hosted a party: a pirate-themed, back-to-school party. Many of us were frustrated and morale was low; few wanted to join in, and most scoffed at the silly pirate hats that were passed around. Some minutes into the event, an administrator-colleague pulled me aside and told me to put my pirate hat on. She said, “People watch you; if you put your hat on, they will too.” There it was—the conviction that I can influence my community for positive growth. In a moment of epiphany, I put my hat on and got to work. Similarly, I was often the first to say yes to whatever task was offered up—from leading student government, to chaperoning dances and retreats, to teaching ESL during my prep period—all in order to look more professional. In sum, I donned every pirate hat I was given.

In the same fashion, during my first year in HE, I put on every hat I was offered; I said yes to every task, in part because it is easy (every dean is looking for another adjunct, every committee, a new member) and in part because I thought that was being professional. It was not until populating my webpage after my first year that I realized having taught nine different courses was not professional: it was frenetic and it allowed me to ignore more abstract parts of my new profession in favor of practicing my previous vocation. Since then, I have culled my list of commitments and eschewed the “defensive culture of guilt and overwork” (Berg & Seeber, 2016, p. 3) so that now, like Deborah, I follow only God’s leading in my career. Embracing this professional autonomy has allowed me to build my place in the institutional mission, to do my own thinking, and to choose my own pirate hats (VanZanten 2011).

Conclusion

Evetts (1999) defined professions as knowledge-based occupations that are achieved after years of higher education. Further, quoting Parsons (1968), she comments that professionals have a unique place in society and boast rationality and affective neutrality (p. 120).

After my work transition, I assert that there is more to it. Deborah’s story features confidence and autonomy. Despite her gender, she resolved disputes, won battles that seemed unwinnable, and wrote poetry telling her story. While I am certain there are more lessons ahead, the core of my growth so far has been finding Deborah-like autonomy. It is this that marks the difference between teaching high school and being a professional in HE. Quoting Runté (1995), Merrow asserts that K-12 teaching is a profession only to the degree that teachers are autonomous. Likewise, Berg and Seeber (2016) assert that individual agency is the powerhouse keeping higher-educators in a profession, rather than a vocation. In discussing how to induct teacher-candidates in undergraduate programs to be professionals, Creasy (2015) highlights that they should be prepared to take control of their own growth and to make autonomous, sound decisions based on their expertise. Because I lacked that agency, the beginning of my HE career felt as if I had “been caught up by a tornado and rudely dumped in the brilliant and confusing world of Oz” (VanZanten, 2011, p. vii). It was not until I gained autonomy and the confidence to wield it that I learned the profession.

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